



Published December 22nd, 2021

Town council's reorganization takes unexpected turns

By Vera Kochan

The annual Moraga Town Council reorganization process on Dec. 8 ran much along the same lines of discord as the Oct. 12 and 13 town council (new member) appointment meetings. The final results were achieved with head-spinning debates and comments by current council members.

While still serving as mayor, Mike McCluer didn't waste time nominating Vice Mayor Steve Woehleke to the mayoral position. A second nomination came from Council Member Teresa Onoda in favor of Council Member Renata Sos.

This action prompted McCluer to speak on behalf of the norm. "The tradition typically is that you look at the second to the last election, and you take the top two vote getters, and those people are in line to be mayor. If you don't think they're fit, appropriate or qualified, sure you don't have to follow that, but that is the tradition." He added, "And, the tradition has served this town extremely well, I think, because it's a natural rotation based on people's votes." Following that logic, McCluer noted that Woehleke should be mayor and Sos vice mayor.

Onoda pointed out that "our protocols are different than what you consider the tradition, and the tradition is not always followed. Our protocols say: 3.1 Election of Officers - The town council is encouraged to rotate the offices of mayor and vice mayor amongst the members of the council according to their order of seniority." Explaining that Sos "was appointed in October 2018, served until 2020, when she was elected with over 26% of the votes. That tally was 6,027, which is an all time high; so with our protocols she is to be the mayor."

Sos made her pitch as to why she would be an asset as the new mayor in 2022. The next year "is going to pose incredibly significant challenges, but also great opportunities for us as a council, because we're going to make decisions that will affect the look and feel of the community for years to come." She cited the Housing Element; the Bollinger Zoning; completing labor negotiations with staff; working with Orinda and Lafayette on updating the Lamorinda Action Plan (which addresses traffic, congestion and transportation alternatives); and working with town staff to achieve those objectives.

Being aware that people have alluded that it's Woehleke's turn to be mayor, Sos felt that based on protocol and the factors of seniority and number of votes received that she should be mayor. "Who has the skills and the temperament required to run productive and successful council meetings?" She added that her comments don't reflect any disrespect for Woehleke.

Council Member Sona Makker felt that she needed more information before casting her vote, as it was clear that hers would be the tie-breaker. After hearing Sos' comments she asked Woehleke, "What makes you suited to be an effective mayor?"

Woehleke replied, "I bring more town volunteer experience than anyone else - over 20 years - the Design Review Board, the Planning Commission, the Hacienda Foundation Board of Directors." In each of those instances, he reminded everyone that he was either the chair or president. He also felt that he has an excellent working relationship with town staff, and a strong background in the principles of decision-making. With Woehleke visibly upset about veering away from the traditional method of town council reorganization in favor of protocols, McCluer reminded members that by following tradition, Woehleke would serve as mayor in 2022, and Sos would get her turn in 2023. He stressed that no matter what, the mayor doesn't get to make any decisions alone; it's up to a vote by all council members.

Continuing his response with regards to what he can bring to the table as mayor, Woehleke made six points: 1) making sure you know what you're trying to achieve; 2) keeping an open mind, 3) having reliable information; 4) understanding your values and trade-offs; 5) using logic; and 6) bringing along stakeholders.

Moments before the vote, McCluer made one last plea for "tradition." Onoda, Sos and Makker voted against Woehleke for mayor with Woehleke and McCluer voting in favor. The process was reversed for Sos, who at that moment took the gavel as new mayor of Moraga. Her first order of business was to ask for vice mayor nominations. Woehleke nominated Makker, and Sos nominated Onoda.

McCluer asked Makker, "Should someone this new be vice mayor? I don't necessarily disagree, but I just wondered from your perspective."

"I would roll up my sleeves and be up for the job," replied Makker. "But, I do think the organization can and should benefit from the tenure and experience of someone who has been here longer than me."

Woehleke questioned Onoda's nomination by mentioning the South Camino Pablo subdivision results, and a heated discussion/debate ensued between both council members. Hearing enough, Makker decided to jump in with both feet and fully accept the nomination citing her leadership experiences outside of Moraga.

With a unanimous vote of 5-0, Makker accepted the vice mayor position, "I'm really optimistic and excited," she stated. "I have a lot of experience in leading different types of teams with different types of stakeholders, and I think at this stage where we are this coming year, we're going to be interacting with lots of different stakeholders where we all need to be ready and prepared to listen to all perspectives, and I'm excited, willing and ready to do that."

Before closing the meeting Sos hoped that all disagreements could be set aside in order to move forward in serving the town. "We have a lot to do, and I know this is a very committed and engaged council. Every single one of you is doing fantastic work and is so committed to this town and serving our constituents that it is a pleasure to serve with you, and I look forward to a productive, engaged, transparent 2022, with continual community outreach, which has already been started and accessibility to the people that we serve."

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